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RESEÑAS DE LIBROS

Manuel Álvarez Tardío y Roberto Villa García
1936: Fraude y violencia en las elecciones del Frente Popular

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BOOK REVIEWS

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The Frente Popular and the god Augustus

There is one supremely common and paradoxical experience in scientific research: the difficulty scientists themselves encounter in accepting new discoveries that force them to change their own ideas. This is a universal fact; it occurs in all fields of knowledge, and it is not difficult to explain. It is based on human beings' way of reasoning. We should recall that this was precisely the subject of Thomas Kuhn's famous thesis of scientific revolutions. He realised that scientists form communities whose common feature is that all their members share a "paradigm", which he understood to be a constellation of convictions that, whether true or not, have become "pre-scientific"; they no longer require empirical justification, and are merely believed without further enquiry. And their influence over scientists is such that they condition the whole process of their research: from the choice of the subject to be investigated, to the angle from which this subject is studied, the questions that are asked about it, the method used, the techniques applied and even the selection of the results that stand out as relevant (and the exclusion of the ones considered irrelevant). The best example given and described by Kuhn was heliocentrism: he observed how it had been proposed by Copernicus in the 1540s, when it was accepted by some and rejected by others. Half a century later, when Galileo made it his own, the tables had turned; the so-called "scientific revolution" was a thing of the 17th and not the 16th century.

If Kuhn had lived a few years longer, he would have seen even more paradoxes: according to the experts, there was no scientific revolution in the 17th century, and regardless of whether there was or wasn't, the "revolutionary" scientists were not aware they were part of a revolution.

If, in addition to that, Kuhn had lived even longer and seen what remained of his thesis in scientists' minds of, he would have been even more amazed. In the new millennium, a multitude of scholars were using the word "paradigm", but giving it the opposite meaning to Kuhn's: a paradigm was no longer the constellation of convictions shared by scientists, but the revolutionary scientific proposal with which a person aims to this constellation. That is, these scholars see a paradigm as a proposal to break the paradigm in the meaning intended by Kuhn.

Over time, Kuhn came to realise that this occurred not only in scientific communities but in all human gatherings, including in illiterate societies. The explanation lies in the fact that the "paradigm", as understood by Thomas Kuhn, is not the fruit of the community (scientific or not), but the indispensable condition that makes it possible for that community to exist. We form communities precisely because we share sufficient convictions to ensure we can understand each other and coexist harmoniously. This is the pre-condition for coexistence. The paradox is that progress implies precisely breaking convictions. Without this, no advance is possible.

This complicates things: the compatibility between coexistence and progress requires an equilibrium that is not always easy to achieve; progress is frequently reduced to the wishes of those whose voice is heard loudest, a path that weakens rather than reinforces coexistence. This, for example, is what today is considered “political correctness”.

There are multiple examples of this –repeating what has been established as being politically correct– throughout history. This year sees the commemoration of one such occasion, the second Russian Revolution in 2017, the Bolshevik Revolution. Until 1989, it was politically correct to consider communism merely as a form of progress, and it was incorrect to recall the millions of Russians –genuinely millions– who perished in the first five years of the Bolshevik regime, first in the 2017 revolution, and then in the civil war that followed. And the matter of Stalin and Stalinism was barely even mentioned.

This is exactly the case in Spain today with everything that has occurred since 1931. It is politically correct to assert that a democratic republic was proclaimed that year and that in 1936 it was crushed by a handful of fascists in the armed forces. Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa have demonstrated that this did not happen quite so *maladroitly* in their book *1936: Fraude y violencia en las elecciones del Frente Popular*, a work whose success has been as widespread as it has been silent. It has only been mentioned in the press in contemptuous terms and amid denials of its scientific worth. I am therefore going to voice my opinion, however much it may fly in the face of political correctness. I have already explained why progress (in this case, in knowledge) can weaken coexistence, but also strengthen it, albeit in the medium term. My long experience as a historian has shown me that the truth always leads to freedom, however unpalatable it may be.

I should note in advance that the authors of the book I mention do not discuss the events occurring since the coup d'état of July 1936, and much less the ensuing civil war. Nor do they touch on the 40 years of dictatorship that followed. They may believe that these whirlwinds were the product of those winds; but I am absolutely certain they do not consider it to have been unavoidable. As I see it, the Franco dictatorship did not last for forty years because he won the war, but because he won the war and took advantage of his victory to remain in power. The actual war of 1936-1939 did not last three years because a handful of generals staged a coup d'état that July, but

because many Spaniards –and many non-Spaniards– reacted to this event by engaging in a conflict in which one side took three years to defeat the other. In fact, this is the reason the generals prevailed, even despite the fact that their coup d'état was basically a failure (I refer to the events of 18 July, 1936).

It would require at least a book to explain all this, and to point out that winds produce whirlwinds only if the circumstances are right or if they give rise to a wind that then turns into a whirlwind. And these circumstances include decisions taken freely for or against the wind; decisions that can only be taken when the wind has already begun to blow, when it may still be little more than a breeze.

By saying this I seek to emphasise that in my understanding of the work of Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa on the elections of February 1936, they do not even remotely imply that the falsification of these elections legitimised the coup d'état that took place five months later. The coup was the result of a decision that concerned what occurred after those elections and which never should have occurred. It was not an unavoidable result of the falsification of the electoral results.

In fact, the book I refer to was part of a line of research that has taken a completely different tack. The first book I read by these authors was the work of Álvarez Tardío (*Anticlericalismo y libertad de conciencia: Política y religión en la segunda república española, 1931-1936*, Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, 2002), which explained the process of constituting the second Spanish Republic in 1931. It shows how some of the winners of the June elections that year imposed on the others –also winners– a maximalist constitution that excluded the losers, when it could have created a legal sphere of coexistence between winners, losers and those who did not consider themselves to be either winners or losers (who may well have been the majority).

The second work I read was another book in which both authors studied the constituent process and the development of electoral legislation in the Cortes of 1931-1933 (*El precio de la exclusión: La política durante la Segunda República*, Ediciones Encuentro, 2010), which clearly supported what I said above, but applied to the future: the winners sought to ensure that in future elections the victory of their opponents would be prevented by the laws themselves. They could have refrained from proposing and approving an exclusive legislation of this kind, but they went ahead (although in spite of everything, they lost and

had to relinquish power); not only that, but some supported the so-called October Revolution of 1934.

As far as I know, Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa do not discuss this October Revolution any further than is necessary for an understanding of what subsequently occurred. The third work I read by these authors was the book on the elections of the Frente Popular in February 1936, in the aforementioned *Fraude y violencia en las elecciones del Frente Popular*. What they conclude in this work—because it is proved by events—is that these elections were held in an atmosphere of coercion that, among many other things, caused several civil governors to flee or to be immobilised on election day. Due to this, and to other similar forms of coercion, it was very easy to falsify the election returns in several Spanish districts. And they were falsified. Simply that.

In this note I really wanted to say nothing more. Of course, much more occurred in the following five months up until the military coup d'état of July 1936. But this is not what Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa examine in this outstanding work, but what was mentioned earlier.

Does that mean an end to the notion that this was a peaceful and model democratic republic? I am in no doubt that it does. A republic whose constitution (1931) contains articles that make peaceful existence—let alone coexistence—impossible for one part of the country's inhabitants cannot be considered either peaceful, model, or democratic; it reinforces exclusion through electoral legislation, not to mention

the falsification of the election returns in 1936. This is not to investigate history *pro domo sua*; it is simply to study, to reach certain conclusions, and then to publish them.

Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa have not wished to respond to those who have accused them of everything under the sun, with one exception, —as far as I am aware—, that of Santos Juliá. The explanation of everything that happened—but not the response—can be found in a book published months later under the direction of Guillermo Cortázar, *Bajo el dios Augusto*, which does not mention the work by Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa, but rather its subtitle: *El oficio de historiador ante los guardianes parciales de la historia*. History, it is true, has “custodians”. It almost always does. It is a rare authority that does not use history to dispel any doubts as to its own legitimacy, whether on the right, on the left, in the centre, or mixed. It is more common however to see emergence of historians who assign themselves the role of “guardians of history” without being invited to do so. Cortázar explains this point very concisely in the introductory chapter. His four co-authors illustrate it with specific aspects and facts that speak for themselves. They mention Augustus because these are the same kind of guardians Augustus had when Seneca marked that under his mandate: “What was allowed to be written was not yet a danger but it was a source of problems”.

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